

BOOK REVIEW

Daniel V. Eastmond and Mark Hawkes, *Book Review Editors*

***Perspectives on Higher Education in the Digital Age,* by Michael F. Beaudoin**

Daniel V. Eastmond

Western Governors University

Perspectives on Higher Education in the Digital Age. Michael F. Beaudoin (Ed.). (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc. 2006, 304 pages, \$89).

“The academy identifies with physical place and stability; but the culture of IT [information technology] emphasizes mobility, youth, and change.” (Ayers, 2005, quoted by Beaudoin, p. 5)

Higher education has come under greater scrutiny for accountability in preparing individuals for the competitive global economy and providing equitable access to all citizens, particularly the poor, underserved, and those with disabilities. The tension has become excruciatingly painful as the “tried and true” direction and modes of operation that have served traditional higher education over the century are increasingly criticized as outdated, irrelevant, and misguided—as the burgeoning

e-learning, commercial higher education enterprises, corporate universities and the like increasingly attest. Having recently read and pondered Peter Smith’s (2004) *The Quiet Crisis* and Thomas Friedman’s (2006) *The World is Flat*, I was particularly interested in what the authors of this volume, edited by the distance education luminary, Michael Beaudoin, would say about these and other issues. The “Spellings Report” (2006), released during my reading of this book, adds its voice to the critics of the current system. It calls for another approach to higher education, one that seeks accountability, access, lifelong learning, and global competitiveness, in part made possible by digital technologies.

Serving in academic administration for an innovative alternative distance institution, Western Governors University, challenges me to compare our competency-based approach to higher education with other initiatives—as

• **Daniel V. Eastmond**, Director of Learning Resources, Western Governors University, 4001 South 700 East, Suite 700, Salt Lake City, Utah 84107. Telephone: (801) 993-2328. E-mail: deastmond@wgu.edu

The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 8(2), 2007, pp. 175–180
Copyright © 2007 Information Age Publishing, Inc.

ISSN 1528-3518
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

well as trends in my own area of responsibility, such as libraries, e-learning, and enabling universal accessibility; these were my own professional interests for engaging this book.

The book has 31 contributing authors for its 17 chapters, many of them written by well-known experts in the field, practitioners as well as academics. It spans a wide variety of issues currently facing higher education—from faculty roles to facilitating “brain gain” in Africa—all written at a provocative, higher-level view about results and possibilities made possible through the introduction of digital technologies. The chapters present the realities of the present while their authors speculate on what the future will bring—if left unchecked or if we exercise the leadership, constraint, and will to create viable higher education institutions that contribute to society. They report research, show current practice, portray tension, enjoin policy, and envision change; little of this is of the “how to” variety. It is aimed at professionals in many different roles who truly care about and have a vested interest in how technology plays out in higher education’s future. I have selected seven chapters as the focus for this review; themes from the others I will briefly mention later.

CHAPTERS OF INTEREST

Michael Beaudoin’s introductory chapter, “The Impact of Distance Education on the Academy in the Digital Age,” sets the stage for the rest of the contributions. He argues that higher education’s transformation to digital technology “will continue to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary” (p. 5) because traditional pedagogy is so entrenched. Despite the proliferation of online distance education over the past decade, with the clear majority of traditional institutions becoming involved, the rise of virtual universities, distance consortia, and growth of for-profit institutions, by and large the academy is slow to embrace change. It views IT “as an added cost, rather than as a value-added benefit” (p. 5). Beaudoin predicts

that higher education will shift to a consumer-centric model, with asynchronous, global access, through expanded continuing education and training arms as well. The digital tsunami will engulf higher education institutions differently; small, parochial, private, liberal arts colleges will become most vulnerable.

The new digital age requires leadership; Beaudoin states “the future of distance education is ultimately not so much about enhancing technology or improving pedagogy, but rather about managing change” (p. 10). This leadership must be able to share a vision and mobilize individuals and the organization to operationalize the innovation together. Such leaders must deal with the macro organizational issues of infrastructure, policy, strategic planning, resources, and less with technology and advocacy for distance education (their foci of the past).

Beaudoin’s speculations about distance education of the future include the observation that interactive and collaborative elements of online instruction across time and space will prevail and be recognized as clearly advantageous over conventional classroom instruction. As technology pervades all aspects of our lives, humans will interface, converge, and become part machines (cyborgs). The dark side may be elitist conventional education carried out at a distance, exacerbating the digital divide between the few and the masses. Distance education may become a model of the past, depending upon what new technologies and their instructional interfaces bring. The prediction is that conventional higher education will not rise to the opportunities and challenges of digital media and telecommunications, so commercial enterprises, foreign institutions, and for-profit universities will fill the vacuum. Beaudoin doesn’t address the impact of globalization, but he does lament that cross-border enrollments of foreign students through distance education has been neglected—a missed opportunity.

Chapter four, “Educational Access and the Role of Distance Education in the Future,” by

Rick Shearer and Heather Chakiris, addresses economic accessibility. It is compelling on several fronts: it addresses socioeconomic equity head-on; it has both an international and U.S. focus; and it speculates how distance education can be part of the solution, while showing how it contributes to the problem. First, the authors document the wide and growing disparity of access to higher education based on household income. For example, a study they cite gives the odds of bachelor's degree completion for college age youth from a household whose income is less than \$35,000 a year to be one in 17 versus odds of one in two for their counterpart in a household of over \$85,000. The poor spend a far greater percentage of their income if they do attend. The chapter presents a systems model with all the relevant variables that explain access (e.g., social status, minority status, financial aid, state appropriations, family income, and net expenses) to explain how difficult it is for a low-income family to attend the university even with financial aid, if the result becomes the same net income.

These authors argue that the prevalent cohort instructional model used to deliver online higher education courses cannot achieve economies of scale to ameliorate the widening socioeconomic gap in developed countries' societies. Mega universities' instructional models that embrace independent and mastery learning models do show promise; these institutions spend more on quality course development and then have low delivery costs. Since U.S. higher education is still dedicated to residential students using hybrid and blended approaches, they simply replicate the classroom cohort model online. Shearer and Chakiris argue that, by so doing, these distance courses for residential students have little impact on closing the economic gap.

Susan McKnight, in chapter five, "The Changing Nature of Academic Libraries in the Digital Age," explains that, with distance telecommunications and digitization, libraries will likely change radically over the next two decades. Clients will change as off-campus

and working professionals from around the world access university libraries from a distance. Services will take a "greater focus on customer needs and responsiveness" (p. 64). The librarian will act as academic liaison in a proactive way—creating e-learning support, reading lists, and information literacy instruction, and pushing information out to users. Librarians addressing information literacy will do so with other team members, similar to the teams created when doing instructional development, to address both generic and curriculum-specific skills with learning resource creation.

McKnight foresees librarians developing, collecting, and categorizing (cataloguing) e-learning learning objects and digital assets, especially arranging copyright clearance and intellectual property rights for their use. Librarians may team across the world with other institutions' librarians to provide around-the-clock help and reference desk services. Some unique repositories, like special collections, can be shared ubiquitously through digitizing and promoting over the Web. She discussed library spaces and layouts, but this seems largely irrelevant to distance educators. I project that the "virtual building" of a library will be dismantled and its functionality placed directly in the online courses and learning communities of distance institutions. McKnight states that librarians must gain instructional development skills or access these through team membership to do their future work. Chief librarians must have greater management skills. She prognosticates that future libraries will also personalize services to user needs.

My favorite contribution was perhaps Jan Visser's "Universities, Wisdom, Transdisciplinarity and the Challenges and Opportunities of Technology," chapter 12. In this essay, he argues that the future is difficult to predict because the will and direction of society changes, often fueled by short-term return-on-investment goals rather than on realizing long-term societal ideals. Passion, he declares, can alleviate the tension in education between

quality and access. Given the global communications and instruction available through telecommunications, passionate souls can interact in online communities, no longer separated by university walls. Visser challenges higher educators to give students more than the diplomas that they seek for extra income and career enhancement; rather, higher education institutions should instill the less-tangible rewards of affiliation with a community of scholars that transcends university boundaries, addressing global problems and issues through transdisciplinary approaches.

Since the advent of agriculture, humans have been engaged in a coevolutionary process of improving their circumstances through technology with resultant impact on the environment, other humans, and other species. The increased pace of change dictates that humans will be confronting problems for which their schooling did not prepare them. Confronting the high-level issues of our day requires citizens of the digital age to develop wisdom: "the ability to see and deal collaboratively with big and complex issues, as well as deep insight into understanding themselves and their world" (p. 198). Visser challenges universities to organize themselves to pursue collaborative knowledge construction, modeling wisdom, and enabling imagination to develop. They must prepare students to address ill-defined problems that have multiple solutions and solution paths. Higher education should work collaboratively with other components of society to confront the huge human problems with a long-term (25- to 50-year) perspective, such as feeding and providing a quality sustainable life for nine billion people on this planet by 2050. The tools and technologies of the digital age are simply a means toward this end, not to be subverted by short-term fixation upon economic development. Higher education can play a pivotal role in the evolving world of the digital age.

Robert Todd and Curtis Edmond address instructional accessibility in chapter 13, "Building Walls or Building Bridges: Accessibility and Online Education." It begins by out-

lining disability types—visual, hearing, speech, and mobility impairments, learning disabilities, and seizure disorders—and lists various instructional accommodations for each. These include electronic and alternative text, closed captioning, speech synthesis and recognition devices, assistive input devices, as well as alternative information presentations and allowance of increased time for instructional tasks. However, the authors promote "universal design" over individual accommodation—an approach that makes instructional materials available to the widest audience possible (without or easily accessible with assistive technology). They emphasize that planning courses for accessibility saves time and expense over retrofitting them later; they point readers to sources such as the Georgia Tech Research on Accessible Distance Education (GRADE) project for course development guidelines to incorporate desirable features. Although no laws specifically address online distance education, three federal laws apply, primarily the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the 1998 amendment of section 508 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act. Universities are urged to voluntarily comply. Todd and Edmonds conclude: "we are not making special accommodations for a few, but building a more adaptable, robust and friendly education of us all" (p. 224).

"Trends Affecting Higher Education and Distance Learning," chapter 14, by Scott Howell, Dwight Laws, Peter Williams, and Nathan Lindsay, is one of the best syntheses of the literature on trends and issues facing distance education that I have seen (though some of the research and conjecture seems slightly dated). Table 1 (p. 228) succinctly summarizes six trends they conclude from their literature review. Retention attention, changing learner profiles, shopping for convenience and circumstance, and inability of current infrastructures comprise their student and enrollment trends. Faculty trends include an unbundling of roles, diminishing resistance to technology, and changing workload and compensation models. The literature suggests general aca-

demic trends toward organizational decentralization, increased competition and partnering with for-profit institutions, instructional use of learning objects and learner-centered, non-linear, and self-instructional methods, as well an expanded emphasis on accountability and competency. The technology will trend toward ubiquitous and versatile Internet technology with expectations of fluency by all educational users. Workers must pursue learning throughout life, while the challenge of funding for IT become their economic and workforce trends. Finally, the authors explain overall trends for distance education—the need for instructional strategies informed by technology, for more effective course management systems, and the demand for online distance education to increase, while the distinction blurs between it and conventional education.

The final chapter, Bruce Winston's "A Future Scenario of Education as a Result of the Digital Age," outlines eight forces that will drive higher education with digitization:

- Digital publication, libraries, and computing power;
- Student proficiency with digital communication;
- Publisher control of content and curriculum;
- Increasing power of consumer-driven education delivery;
- Increase in for-profit colleges and universities;
- Near-term retirement of college/university professors;
- Increase in free-agent "accredited" professors, and
- Increasing difficulty in accrediting the digital college/university.

These forces will create a plethora of possible scenarios by 2030, the year Winston has chosen to describe the academe in a new age. The emerging generation will embrace and become natural users of the ubiquitous, pervasive telecommunications technologies. They will need to learn at anytime or place—empha-

sizing the practical. The publishing industry, he projects, will own the knowledge base, transmitting it digitally, replacing the classroom professor as the source. Universities will cease to offer multiple versions of the same course because of distance delivery. Professors, not higher education institutions, will be accredited. These professors will be free agents, working for several institutions simultaneously. The U.S. Department of Education will accredit learning experiences that can be seamlessly transferred, accumulated, and used in ways that students, employers, and universities require. He also foresees professional association accreditation and for-profit universities flourishing, whereas religious higher education institutions will shrivel or need to reassess their mission as one of acculturating (not educating) young adults (since secular offerings will become so pervasive).

OTHER CHAPTERS

In the short space remaining, let me summarize some of the topics contained in this volume. Six chapters seemed more theoretically focused. Conrad argues that e-learning and social change are contradictory because strong institutional affiliations tend to support the status quo. Anderson posits that educational social software will promote greater individual choice over content, pacing, access, and media. LaPointe explains four approaches whereby educators can facilitate transformational learning through distance education. Mackintosh uses the complex variables and systems involved with conceptual modeling to project three possible scenarios for higher education. Finally, Saba proposes a dynamic vision to move higher education from an industrial to a postmodern era through digital technology.

The other five chapters were more pragmatic in focus. Dupin-Bryant predicts that future students and educators will use multiple, transparent computing devices that blend into the rhythm of their lives' activities. Stein

and Glazer posit that the faculty role will shift to that of mentoring the online adult learner. Two strictly international chapters follow: Kurtz (and others') discussion of the challenges and opportunities arising from implementing e-learning in Israel, and Schachter (and others') visioning of successful distance learning in Africa, made possible through distance telecommunications. Finally, Luechtefeld and Watkins explain three principles that can balance the tension between theory and practice in future higher education.

ENDING REMARKS

Given the context of recent books and report within which I read this volume, I was somewhat disappointed to not see as much discussion of the role of a technologically infused higher education playing a greater role in the global economy. Nor was the U.S. system, the implied model depicted throughout the volume, depicted in relation to other countries' systems of higher education (the exceptions were Israel and Africa, addressed in specific chapters). I was pleased to note that issues of quality, equality, and access were addressed by various (but not all) authors. Although the preponderance of chapters dealt with the future of higher education, this theme did not become belabored or overly repetitious; rather, each writer spoke from a different perspective or devoted his or her commentary to a specific aspect, such as libraries, technology, accessibility, social justice, and so forth.

Jan Visser concludes his chapter (discussed earlier) by saying that he deliberately excluded distance education from his essay because he finds "the technologies, mechanisms and pro-

cesses used to facilitate the kind of learning demanded by the challenges [of our age] ... as largely irrelevant" (p. 202).

However, the key challenge is to the imagination to reinvent, and continue to reinvent higher education using all means available and inventible. While doing so, it will become increasingly irrelevant to try and reserve a special place for what we used to call distance education. (p. 202)

As distance education becomes the norm, the majority vehicle of delivery, when time and space become trivial as barriers to learning, will this construct that we are so invested in as distance educators go away? My jury is still out on this one. What I can say is that *Perspectives on Higher Education in the Digital Age* has joined the other recent books and report that I mentioned in effectively engaging this portion of the discussion, as well as the many other pertinent issues it addresses. Without reservation I recommend it to my colleagues in higher education.

REFERENCES

- Ayers, E. (2005, November-December). Harmonizing the realms of academe and IT. *Education Review*.
- A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education. A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings*. (2006). Retrieved September 28, 2002, from <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/pre-pub-report.pdf>
- Friedman, T. L. (2005). *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.
- Smith P. (2004). *The quiet crisis: How higher education is failing America*. Bolton, MA: Anker.